

The Politics of War and the ‘Battle of Balaklava’

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Abstract

This paper seeks to aid and open further discussion on the impact upon Aboriginal communities and lives during and after World War One. We now know that over a thousand Aboriginal men enlisted and went overseas to fight for their so-called country during the Great War and that many made the ultimate sacrifice. But what was happening at home to their families and communities whilst they were away? Did they receive just recognition on their return home? These are some of the questions this paper will reveal and analyse.

In 1925 an Aboriginal returned soldier by the name of Arthur Weetra led a so-called Aboriginal street ‘riot’ in the rural town of Balaklava in South Australia. The eruption of hostilities was in direct response against local white community pressure upon Aboriginal land and injustice. Weetra and a number of his brothers and friends not only voiced their discontent but also openly showed their anger by knocking a number of policemen to the ground in what became known as the ‘Battle of Balaklava’. The article will examine the infamous battle but also locate that event in the context of Aboriginal returned soldier experiences across the continent in the aftermath of the First World War.

Clearly for much of the twentieth century this country conveniently forgot, missed or erased Aboriginal history, including the history of those who had fought for the country, and the recognition that Australia itself had been a widespread battlefield through the frontier wars. A war was waged in this country by the British from 1788 in which tens of thousands of our people lost their lives in defending their country in the face of invasion, occupation, dispossession and cultural destruction. There are few monuments, plaques, or memorials to

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mark the bravery of our people in defending their country. A small minority of tragic events like Myall Creek and the Coniston Massacre remain as stained markers upon the shameful history of this country. As Gary Foley (2014, p. 19) eloquently reminded the wider white community:

Many Australians are further entrenching an attitude of denial about key aspects of their own history. They are seeking to divert attention away from earlier wars that had more to do with defining the Australian national character than Gallipoli did. By that I mean the ‘colonial’ wars that many in Australia still have great difficulty in even accepting as wars... battles such as the Gallipoli campaign were more about fighting on behalf of Britain rather than Australia.

These are the sorts of discussions we should be having alongside the Gallipoli and World War One celebrations over the course of the next four years.

Nevertheless, a new major four year study led by Professor Mick Dodson titled *Serving Our Country* acknowledges that there are many Aboriginal families and communities that carry great pride in their forebears’ military records. The project’s brief is to recognize Indigenous involvement in every military campaign from the Boer War through to Afghanistan and Iraq. The main focus for my involvement on the project will centre on both WWI and the Boer War. It is the missing stories that I am most interested in uncovering. I seek to provide insights in some of the tantalizing issues around individual Aboriginal and community responses to war, through snapshots of our experiences. These sometimes unexpected stories will both enrich and dismantle the Australian mythic war narrative. Whilst a majority of scholarly studies of Aboriginal military service have concentrated on World War II (eg Ball 1991; Gordon 1962; Hall 1977, 1995), a number of scholars have targeted World War I (eg Foster 2000; Goodall 1987; 1988; Huggonson 1993; Jackomos & Fowler 1993; Kartinyeri 1993; Scarlett 2014).

This paper continues with the tradition of recuperative history that takes pride in accountability first and foremost to Aboriginal communities. Over a long period of time I have had great success based on archival research examining old newspaper files. The final section of this paper is importantly based on a case study of bubbling Aboriginal resentment over ill-treatment and injustice in the wake of World War One at the South Australian town of Balaklava in 1925. The story is not framed in the common ‘they were there too’ format of Aboriginal experience of WWI. The account of this incident is very important and different

in that it examines a little known episode of protest and revolt by returned Aboriginal servicemen. This case study illustrates the importance of newspaper records and their usefulness to Aboriginal history. The majority of material utilised in this instance I first uncovered at the Mortlock Library in South Australia more than a decade ago. It was not retrieved using the National Library of Australia's Trove, an online search system giving access to the holdings of thousands of organisations, but rather I examined on microfiche as many newspaper runs published during the 1920s as I could find, looking for references to issues relating to Indigenous political struggles.

Over the course of the next four years (from 2014), Australia will be bombarded with celebrations of the hundred years since the First World War and Gallipoli. It is of critical importance that our stories are told and recognized as part of this history. Aboriginal men and women have fought in every military campaign that this country has taken part in with many making the ultimate sacrifice. Incredibly up until 1967 our people enlisted and fought for a country within which we had been told that we were not even recognised as citizens. The Aboriginal history of WWI and WWII is not just about battles, medals and glory but the savage injustice inflicted upon our people despite their courage and heroism.

I have previously reflected on stories not told before, including of Aboriginal opposition to the war (Maynard 2014). Legendary Aboriginal political activist, Fred Maynard, for instance as a Sydney wharf labourer, had campaigned against Billy Hughes' conscription referendum and helped defeat it twice (Maynard 2007, pp. 18-19). But many of our communities actually gave unwavering support to patriotic funds and assistance to the war effort. The records reveal that Aboriginal women knitted batches of socks to be sent to Australian soldiers in the trenches (*Australian Aborigines Advocate* 1919). Aboriginal men carved walking sticks for the badly maimed soldiers that returned home (*Our Aim* May 1915, p. 3.) Coverage in the *Brisbane Courier* revealed that Aborigines 'state that their wish is to be useful to the Commonwealth and point out that in the recent war men of their race assisted in fighting and those who were left behind helped with patriotic funds' (24 July 1922, p.7) The fervour that Aboriginal people carried patriotically for the war effort would, in turn, through disappointment and lack of recognition, act as the catalyst and ignition point of political revolt in the postwar years.

The impact of WWI on Aboriginal communities had many long lasting negative effects. ‘The catastrophic global impact of the Spanish influenza pandemic in 1918 witnessed a high percentage of Aboriginal people succumb to the deadly outbreak. It has been estimated that over 500 million people were infected worldwide and it killed between fifty to one hundred million of them’. Returned soldiers brought the Spanish flu back into Australia and its horrific devastation of our communities was readily identifiable (Crump 2014). A Queensland newspaper report revealed the flu’s deadly impact at Barambah:

Not long after the outbreak fifty blacks were dead, showing that the inmates must have died like flies. It also says that the men who were engaged in making coffins were unable to keep pace with the mortality, and that some of the bodies were interred in trenches (*Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton) 7 June 1919, p. 9).

Inferior housing and living conditions, poor diet and inadequate health provisions were instrumental in the high proportion of Aboriginal deaths attributed to the flu.

As for the war itself, the question still remains why did Aboriginal men go? On the latest Australian War Memorial figures available over thirteen hundred Aboriginal men fought for their country in WWI.¹ This figure has quadrupled from the some three hundred as noted in 1988 (Goodall 1988, p. 32). Unquestionably there were numerous motivations for Aboriginal soldiers wanting to enlist and fight overseas in WWI. The desire for decent wages was one: ‘the average wage of Aboriginal workers in Queensland in 1914 was seven shillings and six pence per week... A private was paid the princely sum of five shillings a day’ (Huggonson 1993, p. 3). Aboriginal men were also fighting for change for their people back home ‘which some thought would be won through war service’ (Scarlett, 2014, p. 39). In correspondence a Barambah resident said ‘three of us went to the great war out of my family one was killed. I always thought that fighting for our King and country would make me naturalise[d] British subject and a man with freedom in the country’ (quoted in Scarlett 2014, p. 39). It is fair to assume that for Aboriginal men the war was an opportunity of gaining justice, acceptance and respect. Sadly on their return it was to be denied. Heather Goodall reflected that:

We do not know all the motives of the young Aboriginal men that enlisted... Perhaps they went for adventure or to escape from rural life or perhaps they went to escape the early Protection Board activities. Perhaps they went to demonstrate the validity of their place in Australia: they certainly returned

¹ Personal communication with Margaret Beadman Australian War Memorial 12 January 2015

with the conviction that their service and sacrifices would be acknowledged as for all other returned soldiers (1988, p.32).

The Aboriginal disillusionment was long lasting with deep resentment carrying over into the Second World War. The older Aboriginal WWI veterans had 'believed in 1914 that a shared future could be developed with white Australians, but their belief had been eroded as each initiative they took was rejected' (Goodall 1988, p. 33). Mick Flick (a WWI veteran from Western NSW) argued strongly against his two elder sons' thoughts of enlisting in WWII. 'This is not **our** fight' he declared, adding, 'it's **their** fight, so they should fight it' (Goodall 1988, p. 33. Emphasis in original).

In the wake of the First World War, a general discontentment raged for oppressed groups globally. This was certainly the case for Aboriginal people in Australia, mirroring American Indian and African American experiences of a rising mobilization of organized agitation (Britten 1999; Lentz-Smith 2011; McMillen 2007; Winegard 2012). Reverend J. C. Phillips speaking at a conference in Melbourne warned of the global 'Colour Problem' brewing:

'The Allies forgot when they gave the world the word 'self-determination' that the idea knew no colour line'. 'From Constantinople to Tokyo the air is electric with the new ideas of nationalism, self-determination and equality' (*The News* June 15, 1925).

The widespread revoking of Aboriginal land, the acceleration in removing Aboriginal children from their families and a mounting resentment carried by Aboriginal returned soldiers was responsible for the establishment of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA). In response Fred Maynard as President of the AAPA in newspaper correspondence and public speaking engagements demanded 'freehold land for Aboriginal families to engage in farming and for the immediate cessation of the removal of children from their families' (Huggonson 1993, p. 7). As Huggonson noted, Aboriginal reserves and land occupied in the early decades of the twentieth century:

were essentially crown lands reserved from sale by notification in the NSW Government Gazette. The title of the land remained with the Crown and classification of the land could be revoked at any time by the government, hence Maynard's call for freehold land title (1993, p. 7).

In the simplest of terms Aboriginal people could hold land only as long as others did not want to use it. Maynard and the AAPA would be involved with a number of highly public

confrontations over Aboriginal reserves that included Nana Glen, Greenhills and Old Burnt Bridge. The Aboriginal leadership on several occasions severely embarrassed the Board through encouraged press coverage that highlighted the injustices committed against the Aboriginal population in New South Wales.

It was little wonder that the AAPA as part of their platform and agenda echoed the call for 'Self Determination'. Newspaper coverage of the first ever Aboriginal civil rights convention held at St David's Church Hall in Surry Hills in April 1925 stated 'First Australians to Help Themselves – Self Determination' and 'Aborigines in Conference – Self Determination is their Aim' (Maynard 2007, p. 53). Fred Maynard and others of the AAPA membership ninety years ago were greatly influenced by Marcus Garvey and his organization in the United States (Maynard 2007, p. 55). Garvey became the torchbearer of inspiration for many with a powerful platform of genuine self-determination. In an interview that first appeared in the *Literary Digest USA* Garvey was cutting in his assessment:

During the World War nations were vying with each other in proclaiming lofty concepts of humanity. Make the world safe for democracy. Self-determination for smaller people reverberated in the Capitols of warring nations opposed to Germany. Now that the war is over we find those same nations making every effort by word and deed to convince us that their blatant professions were just meaningless platitudes never intended to apply to earth's darker millions. We find the minor part of humanity – the white people constituting themselves lords of the universe, and arrogating to themselves the power to control the destiny of the larger part of humanity (*Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton)* 11 June, 1921, p. 10).

In Australia there was rising widespread discontent and a growing Aboriginal voice of dissatisfaction. James Harris wrote to a newspaper in Western Australia:

Some of our numbers took part in the Great War and made the supreme sacrifice, while others have returned to find that they are no nearer to getting a fair deal. We haven't got a vote in the country, nor a voice in the framing of the laws that govern us (*Sunday Times (Perth)*, 30 October, 1921, p. 12).

The callous treatment of ripping away Aboriginal land during this time period was given wide press coverage. A white returned soldier in Atherton in northern Queensland stated with compassion and feeling 'the saddest thing he ever witnessed was the deportations of about a score of Abo[rigine]s of all ages. Yes we heard of the Germans deporting the Belgians to Germany, but here we have a more brutal thing taking place' (*Cairns Post* 19 February 1920,

p.6). There was pressure mounting on Aboriginal land at Karuah in NSW as a racist complaint printed in the local press reveals:

The residence of Aborigines on allotments is detrimental to white settlement... It is not much encouragement for returned men who want allotments near Karuah to have to live alongside blacks, and to be classed socially the same as them (*The Raymond Terrace Examiner and Lower Hunter and Port Stephens Advertiser* April, 1923).

At least one correspondent in writing a response recognized the contribution of the Aboriginal community at Karuah:

Dark men, many of them went to the front, as well as white men, some lost their lives in defence of the King and country, and some returned bearing the brand of brave soldiers of the King (*The Raymond Terrace Examiner and Lower Hunter and Port Stephens Advertiser* April 6, 1923, p3).

Those speaking out against what was a brutal process were in the minority but their voices remain in the record. An article in the *Wingham Chronicle* revealed:

During the past few months' circumstances of such character have made the conditions of the Aborigines extremely difficult – the land is being sold and they are finding themselves on the roadside, or any other corner of 'No Mans Land', where they in their hapless lot find themselves, homeless, disheartened and resentful of the injustice which is being meted out to them (*The Wingham Chronicle* June 10, 1925).

Further up the coast of New South Wales similar pressure was being applied to Aboriginal land holdings at Rollands Plains near Port Macquarie. A newspaper column - letter to the editor entry remarked:

that the local Aborigines Reserve be made available for returned soldiers... In connection with the Aborigines Reserve here the [A]borigines have but very limited use of it... Such being the case, could not inferior land be found to answer the purpose of a reserve... when it comes to a question of [A]borigines reserve or soldier's farm, my voice is given for the soldier (*The Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate* 17 May 1919, p.4).

'The Battle of Balaklava' and not the famous charge of the Crimean war

This bubbling over of Aboriginal resentment erupted in a long forgotten event in South Australia in 1925 known as the 'Battle of Balaklava'. The rural town of Balaklava is located some 92 kilometres north of Adelaide on the banks of the Wakefield River and the town was

named after the famous battle of the Crimean War (Place Names of South Australia n.d.). Local white residents and the town council had mounted a campaign to close the nearby Aboriginal reserve and have all of the Aboriginal residents moved on. The Hon. T. Butterfield (Commissioner of Crown Lands) in referring to the Balaklava District Council Report that it intended to close the Aboriginal reserve stated, 'it seems to me to be a peculiar request... Where does the council expect the [A]borigines to go? They must go somewhere' (*The News* 7 April, 1925).

Robert Foster has revealed that white pressure on Aboriginal people and their communities in the wake of World War One was not an isolated incident in South Australia. In 1921, three Aboriginal men, including 'Eustace Garnett Wilson a World War One veteran, were driven off Point McCleay by the authorities for relatively minor infractions'. In 1931 the 'white residents of Port Victoria applied to have their town declared a prohibited area. Their reason was that they objected to Aboriginal people coming into town on a Saturday night'. During the mid-1920s the South Australian Aborigines Department armed with the passage of a new Aborigines (Training of Children) Act intended to accelerate removing Aboriginal children from their mothers' care. The projected success of this new policy backfired on the Department when the first child taken away in 1924 was the 'child of Priscilla Karpany, a young mother working on Poltalloch Station near Point McCleay'. Karpany gained the services of an Adelaide solicitor and the case received widespread media coverage. The press interest was undoubtedly encouraged by the fact that Priscilla Karpany's brothers were two highly respected World War One veterans, George and William Karpany. The men had served with distinction in France. George had also served at Gallipoli, earning the rank of Lance Corporal. Priscilla Karpany's mother spoke of the hypocrisy and injustice of the Department's actions: 'Two of my sons fought at the war for England and Australia. Is there to be one law for the white people, and another for the black?' Subsequently through the sustained media coverage Priscilla's child was returned. (Foster 2000, pp. 22–25).

In the lead up to the 'Battle' at Balaklava, newspaper accounts had alleged Aboriginal men had been demanding railway construction workers provide them with liquor under the threat of violence. One of the railway workers, it was claimed, had been wounded in such an incident. But a police inquiry turned up no evidence to verify this account. The newspaper provided details of the so called 'Battle of Balaklava' when a large group of white railway workers were in the town drinking and it was inferred that someone had supplied Aboriginal

men with alcohol. In the wake of the earlier confrontations and allegations, this was probably an orchestrated strategy in order to provoke an incident. An argument erupted between one of the white workers and Aboriginal man Maxwell Weetra. Whatever the provocation, Weetra struck the white man and a fight erupted.

Sgt. Rowe of the police station was notified. The sergeant's arrival was evidently the signal for a combined resistance on the part of the blacks, who came onto the scene. In attempting to arrest Maxwell Weetra, an attack was made on the sergeant, in which he received severe blows to head and was felled to the ground. Just then a mounted constable came to his senior's assistance, only to meet with the same treatment (*The Register* 1 April, 1925, p.11).

The 'Battle' received wide press coverage. A report in the Launceston *Telegraph* stated that 'two constables were roughly handled by the blacks, who were mostly returned soldier natives, and fought like tigers' (*The Daily Telegraph* 1 April, 1925). Arthur Weetra was easily identified in the thick of the fracas being 'considerably over six feet in height, and a returned soldier. He knocked the sergeant down' (*The Chronicle* (Adelaide) 4 April, 1925). The white townspeople and railway workers moved to rescue the severely beaten policemen. Greatly outnumbered, the Aboriginal men gave a great account of themselves and most made their retreat. Unfortunately, Maxwell Weetra was grabbed by the crowd and arrested. Military warrior Arthur (called Albert in some press reports) Weetra described as a 'big powerfully built man' was discovered in the bakery and 'it took five men to secure him' (*The Daily Telegraph* 1 April, 1925). The rest of the Aboriginal men were chased down by cars on their way back to the reserve and were arrested without incident. All of the Aboriginal men appeared in court on the following Monday. Maxwell Weetra, Arthur Weetra, Sperling Weetra, Harold Martin, Harold Chester and Joseph Power were each sentenced from four to six months hard labour for various charges including assaulting the police, intoxication and having used obscene language. Two other Aboriginal men, Harry Weetra and Harry Taylor, were each fined 40/-. The bench congratulated the police officers for their courageous behavior! The incident gave ammunition to a move that 'the Aboriginal reserve in Balaklava might be closed and the land be put to a better use than a harbour for blackfellows, who were not only indolent but a menace to the town' (*The Daily Telegraph* 1 April, 1925).

The Aboriginal residents received support from an unlikely source for the time, Protector of Aborigines Mr. F. W. Garnett, who said 'white people may get drunk and disturb the peace,

and nothing unusual takes place. But if anything went wrong among the blacks... a great fuss is made out of it' (*The Register* 30 April, 1925, p. 12). Another writer to the editor challenged the validity of the police and court actions in the incident:

The poor black is down and out, and we have heard nothing in their defence from the natives... They have a right to more than the present reserve if needs be. It would be wrong to shift them, and to take away their legitimate reserve just because they got drunk and were fighting. Would the council shift every white man and confiscate his land that gets drunk and engages in fighting. The black man is, by proclamation and law, entitled to be protected and found food and country in return for what he gave, or rather what was taken from him... In all probability this area of country was the home of his forefathers... Some of the blacks that travel about shearing and working are more worthy than many white men. They are most respectable and intelligent (*The Register* 30 April, 1925, p. 12).

Another report in the *News* revealed that not all of the white residents agreed with the proposal to 'oust the Weetra family from the reserve' (*The News (Adelaide)* April 9, 1925). The media coverage in excited tones stated:

Balaklava has not yet exhausted the topic of the recent 'battle' which occurred there between a number of excited [A]borigines on the one hand and police and townspeople on the other. Those who witnessed the event are constantly discovering some fresh little episode with which to regale the ears of those who missed it (*The News (Adelaide)* April 9, 1925).

The press coverage was adamant that all was now quiet 'on the northern front'. The paper included a revealing interview with the very well respected Mrs Eliza Weetra, the mother of the Weetra brothers:

'I don't think they can turn us out', she said. But her voice expressed a doubt and two big tears rolled down her cheeks... Mrs Weetra expressed the opinion that her sons Arthur, Spurling, Maxwell and Harry Weetra and their friends had been too harshly dealt with. She considered their wrongs had been magnified. 'I know there are many people who would like to drive us off our holding but that would be most unjust', she remarked. Her father, she added, held the land before her, and she and her husband had cultivated it on the share system for the past 20 years (*The News (Adelaide)* 9 April, 1925).

Mrs Weetra went on to say that all of her boys were employed on local farms and stations as stockmen and shearers. Her boy Albert [Arthur] was a returned war hero and had been left 'hard of hearing, one of his eyes was affected, and he still had a piece of shrapnel in his head'. In her concluding remarks Mrs Weetra declared she had 'brought up a family of nine children,

the youngest being a girl aged seven years, who was still at school' (*The News (Adelaide)* 9 April, 1925). It takes little imagination or research to unravel the persistent insidious attacks to remove the Weetra family from their home:

The property, which consisted of about 100 acres of good land, had been inherited by them from Mr. Goldsmith, the father of Mrs Weetra, to whom it had been allotted as an [A]boriginal reserve. (*The News (Adelaide)* 9 April, 1925).

In fact three of Eliza Weetra's sons had enlisted in WWI: Arthur, Hubert and Harold. Arthur had been wounded in action in France in 1917 (National Archives of Australia). These were the experiences of Aboriginal soldiers and their families in the aftermath of WWI: neither recognition nor compensation. Their land was under severe attack through the pressure of white greed and the memories of their courage and valiant deeds in defence of their country quickly consumed with the passage of time.

For the greater part of the twentieth century the memorialisation of Gallipoli and the Western front was confined to a white ANZAC history. I conclude with another reference to the 'Battle of Balaklava' that appeared as a poem in that renowned Australian journal, *The Bulletin*, publisher of the likes of 'Banjo' Patterson, Henry Lawson and 'Breaker' Morant:

The Charge of the Dark Brigade

All the world has duly wondered,
As the poet sternly bade,
At that gallant, grim Six Hundred
Who to death and glory thundered
And, because somebody blundered,
Died betrayed.
Oh, the blades that bravely flashed,
As they cut and thrust and slashed
Through the huddled ranks they smashed.
Undismayed!
But there's never sword nor sabre for a carver,
When Weetra leads the blacks at Balaklava
Yet untold in epic story
Is the wondrous charge they made;
Not so grim nor yet so gory
Was the path they trod to glory,
This undaunted minnatory

Dark Brigade.
 Oh, the beers they bravely met,
 And the blood from noses let!
 The policemen they upset
 On that raid
 With Peace League measures he holds no palaver
 When Weetra leads the blacks at Balaklava.
 So I cry upon him shame
 Who first said 'What's in a name?'
 Could another see the same
 Charge remade?
 Not a spot more aptly named from here to Java,
 When Weetra leads the blacks, than Balaklava. (*The Bulletin* April 16, 1925, p. 24)

Postscript

The tag 'the Fighting Weetras' is not an undue recognition of a remarkable family. Eight members of the Weetra family went on to enlist in the Second World War in the Australian Army and Air Force - Cecil, Glenard, Keith, James, Leonard, Leslie, Thomas and Valma.²

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